

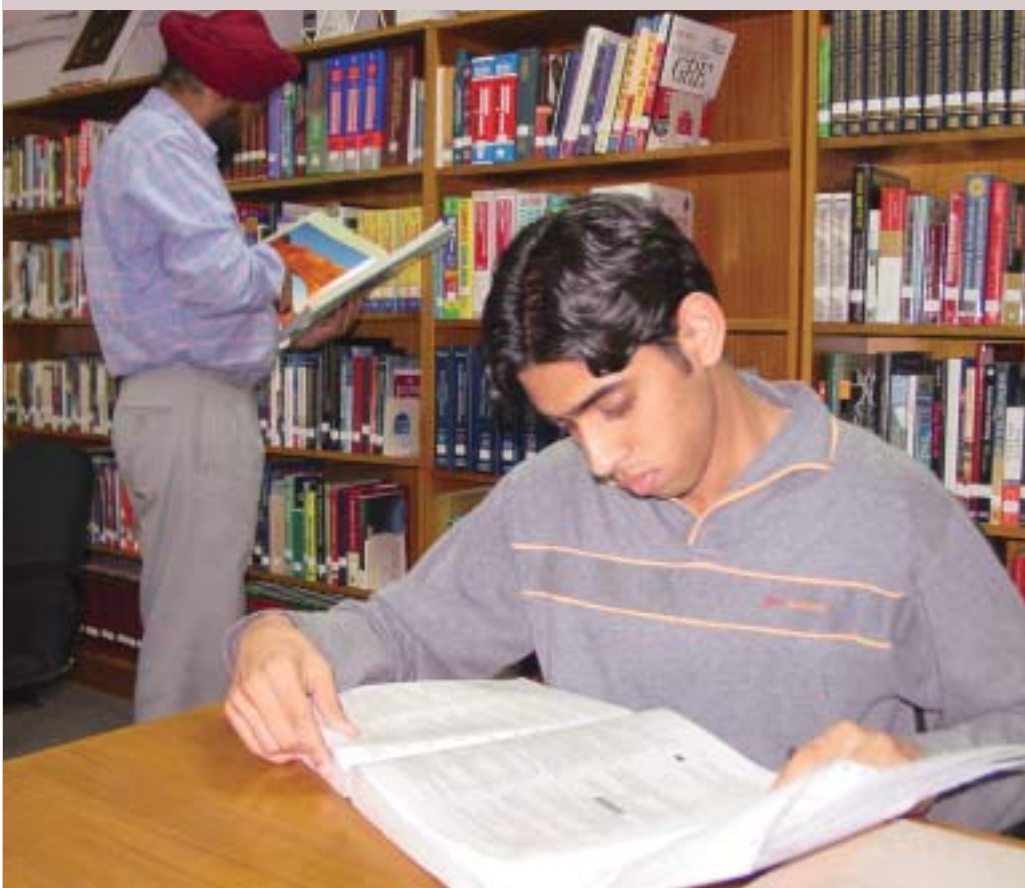
American Corners

REACHING OUT

By DIPESH SATAPATHY

Just left of the entrance to the tranquil second floor of the T.S. Central State Library in Chandigarh, people of varied ages are busy browsing among racks of books and magazines on the United States. On March 28, this space, called the American Corner, attracted literary enthusiasts for a lecture by African American poet Al Young, and in February a two-day workshop on media ethics was organized here. Far to the southeast, in Bhubaneswar, the Knowledge Centre, a private library run by a retired doctor, is home to another American Corner. In the west, Ahmedabad's American Corner is tucked into a management school, the Ahmedabad Management Association; and South India's Corner is in Bangalore, on the premises of Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, a prominent cultural and educational organization.

For more than half a century, the primary sources of information about the United States for Indians were the American Center libraries, now called the American Information Resource Centers (AIRCs), in the four metros—New Delhi, Chennai, Calcutta and Mumbai. Now, in a modest outreach effort to extend these facilities and customer services to other important parts of India, the Public Affairs Section of the U.S. Embassy has opened American Corners in four



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Student Sahil Khanna at the Chandigarh Corner (above); Consul General in Mumbai Angus T. Simmons inaugurating the American Corner at Ahmedabad last September 8 (right); Dipti Panda at the Bhubaneswar Corner (middle); and a view of the Bangalore Corner (far right).



USHA SUNIL



Courtesy Knowledge Centre, Bhubaneswar

American Corner Locations

Ahmedabad Management Association,
ATIRA Campus, Dr. Vikram Sarabhai Marg,
Ahmedabad 380 015

Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Race Course Road,
Bangalore 560 001

Knowledge Centre, 33, Satya Nagar,
Bhubaneswar 751007

T.S. Central State Library, 2nd Floor, Sector 17,
Chandigarh 160017

regions of the country. The Corners contain books, periodicals, magazines, CDs, DVDs and videos, plus Internet access.

Each Corner is hosted by an Indian partner institution. Each is distinct in character and operates a bit differently. But they all provide space and welcome members of the public. Knowledge Centre, the private library run by Dr. Ajay Kumar Mahapatra, had a stall at the Bhubaneswar Book Fair in March to make visitors aware of the new American Corner in the city. A book display of American Corner titles was also set up at the English department of Utkal University, which hosted a panel discussion on "Women's Studies in Multicultural America" organized by the Cultural Affairs Section of the U.S. Consulate in Calcutta. That was a way of establishing contacts with academics teaching American literature in colleges in Orissa. Rita Ray, a sociology professor at Utkal University, feels the Corner needs even more publicity. "It's well kept and I find it very useful," she says.

The goal of the American Corners is to bring accurate, reliable information about the United States to Indians and build bridges of understanding. The Corners cater to those who have limited or no exposure to American culture or ideals or are simply interested in knowing more about America. The resources help individuals expand their skills and understand American values.

In addition to providing information, the

hope is that the Corners will serve as venues for special events and mutually beneficial interaction through speakers, discussions and exhibits. Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan's American Corner in Bangalore opened last September 30 with an exhibition of photographs by American architecture historian John Margolies and a lively book discussion on educational reform. The Chandigarh Corner's launch included a performance by two American musicians.

"The American Corner program, in ways both great and small, will build bonds of friendship and mutual understanding between our two democracies," Robert Blake, Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. Embassy, said when inaugurating the Chandigarh Corner on December 14. "We hope it will help foster closer people-to-people ties between our two countries."

It is too early to say how successful the Corners will become, but the initial response shows they meet a need and should grow more popular as people come to know about them. Nidhi Bisht, a political science postgraduate student from Chandigarh University, uses the American Corner often and finds good books on politics but wants more titles to guide students in pursuing higher studies in the United States. Kenyan academic Justus Mugwe Njuguna, who resides in Chandigarh, had to travel to the New Delhi American Center earlier to do research, but now finds the local Corner a boon.

"It was required for a very long time," says M.S. Walia, a Corner patron from Chandigarh. "It should have been here earlier. Facilities offered are very good." And Muia Singh, professor of English literature at Punjab University, agrees, "People have been benefiting from American studies and cultural exchange."

"All four American Corners in India have good relations with the American Information Resource Centers and, as time goes on and the partners get to know one another better, cooperation will become stronger," adds Wendy Zaman, Information Resources Officer of the Public Affairs Section at the U.S. Embassy. She says that the idea of the American Corners is catching on around the world. She says about 225 Corners are operating in different countries to provide a "window to American life" and useful, user-friendly information to people who want access to U.S. resources. □

Sample of resources in American Corners

Books include:

Books on American English usage
Encyclopedia Americana
A to Z of American Women Leaders and Activists
African-American Art
American Art Since 1945
The American Heritage Encyclopedia of American History
The American Presidency: Origins and Development, 1776-1998
The Best American Poetry 2003
National Geographic Guide to the National Parks of the United States

Periodicals such as:

American Quarterly
Art in America
Good Housekeeping
Foreign Affairs
Smithsonian

Examples of CDs:

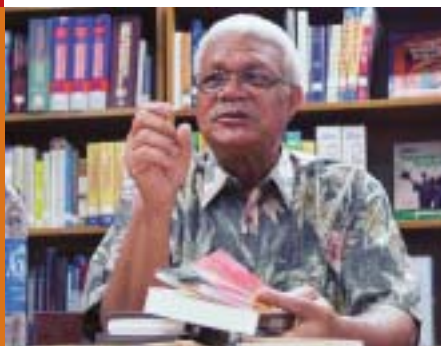
American Heritage Talking Dictionary
World Book Encyclopedia
Exploring America's National Parks
History of Country Music
American Vista Atlas
Great Depression
Industrial Revolution in America
Investigating American Literature

Some of the Videos and DVDs:

Echoes from the White House and Understanding the Government
American Photography: A Century of Images
American Roots Music
Benjamin Franklin
Chicago: City of the Century
An Evening with Mark Twain
The Famous American Author Series
Fun Facts of American History
The Great War and the Shaping of the 20th Century
Great Projects: The Building of America
Liberty! The American Revolution



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African American poet Al Young interacting with literature enthusiasts at the Chandigarh American Corner on March 28.